HISTORY OF LAND-REVENUE OF CHOTA-NAGPUR IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

By

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The land-revenue system of the hilly and Jungly tribal area of Jharkhand, called Chota-Nagpur division since 1854, has a peculiar interest for us : it provides a clear instance of the survival of the oldest land revenue system of India founded and consolidated by the Dravidians.[1] The Chota-Nagpur plateau is a centre which helps us in reconstructing the organisation of "Kols and Dravidians, the latter being great colonizers and conquerors like the Rajputs," and this organisation resembles that which once existed in Gondwana and in South India.[2]

Tribal economy is usually characterised by a "close relation between economy and habitat."[3] The tribal dependence on forest for food, fuel, house-building materials, agricultural implements and minor produce for barter is always great, and shifting cultivation "marks a stage of transition from hunting and food gathering to settled agriculture".[4] Perhaps the tribal people of the Chota-Nagpur plateau went through all these phases of settlement. While some tribes like the Oraons of the Ranchi district have been sturdy cultivators, the Hos or the Larka Kols of Singhbhum, the Bhumijs of Manbhum and Dhalbhum, and the Mundas of Ranchi have been part cultivators and part hunters and fruit-gatherers.

The plateau, which rises from some eight hundred or thousand feet in the south-east to the height of three thousand six hundred feet in the west with well-cultivated plains on each terrace and the borders of each scarped end forest-clad,[5] had never been effectively subjugated before the British came to this area. Naturally enough, the tribal people could

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1. Radha Kamal Mukerjee, *Land problems of India*, p. 34.
2. B. H. Baden-Powell, *The Land-Systems of British India*, p. 574.
3. Ranvir Prakash Saxena, *Tribal Economy in Central India*, p. 127.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
5. Baden-Powell, *op. cit.*

preserve their ancient land system. But during the Mughal period when the imperial authority established some contact with this area, the tribal chiefs were accepted as zamindars, and some of them got *sanads* on agreeing to pay a '*peshkash*' or tribute.[6]

As the power of the East India Company was extended in the late eighteenth century the first contacts were made with the tribal chiefs. The grant of Mirkasim of 1760 gave the Company the territories later known as the Jungle Mahals and Dhalbhum in the Midnapur district and the grant of the Diwani of 1765, besides confirming the former grant, added to the Company's territories the Chota-Nagpur estate with its dependent *parganas*, together with the other tribal areas like Ramgarh, Palamau, Pachet, etc. But the real British penetration of the Jungle Mahals began in 1767,[7] and of Chota-Nagpur proper in 1769.[8]

It was with great difficulty that the tribal chiefs were compelled to pay a fixed revenue to the Company. For example, it was after a protracted military operation that Jagannath Dhal of Dhalbhum agreed in 1777 to pay to the Company Rs. 2,000 for the first year, Rs. 3,000 the second year and Rs. 4,000 the third,[9] and this settlement was continued under the Decennial Settlement.[10] Finally, in 1800 it was raised to Rs.4,267.[11] The *mahals* were now known as *hazuri* (paying revenue direct to the Government). By and large, the tribal chiefs were treated as zamindars of Grant's second class, i. e., made tributory by conquest, treaty or convention, without either full political of proprietary rights yet not mere revenue collectors. Naturally enough, the tribal chiefs, who were also hinduised, changed their attitude towards the tribal peasantry.

In short, the British recognised the surviving rajas, chiefs and grantees as zamindars. Gradually the new revenue system was imposed by the Company, least realising that these tribal tillers of land had no experience of the survey and detailed assessment of the Mughals. The attempt to introduce a formal revenue system was likely to be ill re-

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6. According to *Ain-i-Akbari* this tributary area was known as Khukhra.
7. J. C. Jha, Early British penetration into the Jungle Mahals, *JBRS*; Vol XLVI, parts 1-IV.
8. J. C. Jha, Early British penetration into Chota-nagpur, *JBRS*, Vol. XLIII, Parts III & IV,
9. *District Gazetteer, Singhbhum*, p. 180,
10. Bengal Revenue consultation 19 of 27 March 1794 (53/14).
11. *D. G, Singhbhum*, p. 180.

ceived, and one which ignored tribal custom and feeling and which was operated by outsiders was certain to cause trouble.

In 1789 it was pointed out that the Permanent Settlement should not be extended to these tribal areas because the amount received from these *parganas* were "more in the nature of a tribute than a revenue proportioned to the produce of the soil".[12] Yet the regulations of Cornwallis were applied to them, and "by the operation of selling estates for revenue balances," many of the zamindars were dispossessed.[13] As Hunter put it, the Permanent Settlement "tried suddenly to substitute contract for custom."[14] The landlords now got unlimited powers of increasing the rents of the cultivators : rack renting ruined many families.

One important class of landholders affected by the new laws was that of the *ghatwals* or *paiks* in the Jungle Mahals. The local leaders of the Bhumijs were the *sardar ghatwals* (marcher lords) who, like the *mankis* of Chota-Nagpur proper and the *manjhis* of Santhal Parganas had organised the tribal occupation and clearance of the lands. They were the circle heads guarding the passes and occupying a *taraf* (*jagir*) at a nominal rent as reward for their services, and maintained a permanent body of retainers—the *digwars, ghatwals* or village heads like the *mundas* and *mahtos* of other areas, *sadials* and *tabedars*[15], enjoying different categories of lands. Under clause 4, section 8, Regulation I of 1793 the *ghatwali* (*paikan*) lands ware resumed and the *ghatwals* of Jungle Mahals were now required to pay Rs. 50,138 instead of Rs. 27,553.[16] A petition from the *ghatwals* of Bishnupur sent to the Judge of Burdwan in May 1798 said : "We with our brethren have for many generations held the office of Ghautwals and Chowkedars. We have an allowance of lands and the sardars hold from 20 to 40 Begas at the most and our brethren under us hold from 5 to 14 Begas..."[17] But now suddenly they took to

12. *D. G. Manbhum*, 193.
13. Firminger, V Report, vide *D. G. Midnapore* 196. Raja of Pachet, Zamindar of Raipur and many others were even humiliated.
14. Hunter, *Bengal MS. Records*, I. p. 89,
15. *Tabedar*, like *Chaukidar* or *gorait* in Chota-Nagpur proper, was on the lowest rung of the ladder. *Sadials, ghatwals and digwars* were almost synonymous : J. M. magistrate to Govt., 15 May 1832, para 4, B. C. 1501/58887.
16. Board to Govt,, 8 March 1799, Beng Rev. Cons. 32 of 15 March 1799 (54/1).
17. Petition, enclosure to Collector to Board, 4 May 1798, Guha & Mitra, *West Bengal Dist. Records, Burdwan*, 329.

violence : the *Sheristadars, tahsildars*, the *daroga* and *barkandazes* were attacked at various places, and the whole area was in chaos and confusion.

At last the blunder committed by the Government was realized and in 1799 these *jagirs* were restored to the *ghatwals*. The zamindars got back their police powers and the *ghatwals* again became a part of the *zamindari* police. This *zamindari* or *ghatwali* police system connected with the land grants has been a unique feature of this area. In 1805 it was extended to Pachet, Bagmundi, Bagankodar, Taraf Baleapar, Katras, Hasla, Jhalda, Jharia, Jaipur, Mukundpur, etc.[18] It was also recommended for other areas of the Ramgarh district.

Indeed the existence of the *ghatwali* lands was significant in as much as that in these tenures not only was the chief entitled to his privileges, but also "every head of a troop in his own grade and rank, and every militiaman had lesser share in the privilege".[19] According to Radha Kamal Mukerjee, "the outlying districts of a conquered territory, in the Dravidian scheme" were occupied by these *ghatwal* chiefs like the *poligars* of south India.[20] This "system of tribal territories and subdivisions, through a system of military aids, investiture of the tribal chiefs and patriach by the raja, and other feudal incidents" could be found among the Gonds in Madhya Pradesh and Berar, the Mundas and Oraons in Chota-Nagpur and the Kandhs in Orissa.[21] The raja or chief occupied the central territory and the *ghatwals* the fringes. A.C. Guha thinks that there is "considerable variety" in the tenures known under the general name of *ghatwali* in different parts of the country, but "they all agree in this that they are grants of land situated on the edge of the hilly country, and held on condition of guarding the ghats or passes."[22]

In the whole of the Chota-Nagpur plateau there were headmen of villages, their names varying from area to area : like among the Mundas of Chota-Nagpur proper, there was, among the Hos of Kolhan a munda as the head of every village. After the military operation of 1819-20

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18. Bengal Cr. Judl. Cons. 16 of 13 Dec. 1805 (129/18).
19. Baden-Powell, *op.cit*. 582.
20. Radha Kamal Mukerjee, *op. cit*. 33.
21. *Ibid*., p. 32.
22. Guha. *op. cit*. Appendix, 419 : they are said to have existed in Birbhum, Bankura, Burdwan, Bhagalpur, Monghyr, Manbhum, Purnea, Patna and the Santhal Parganas.

Major Roughsedge fixed a rent of eight annas per plough and after the final annexation of this area in 1836-37 this system was confirmed by Wilkinson.[23] The Munda of every village now became responsible for the collection of the land revenue to the British Government's representatives in the South-West Frontier Agency. A *manki* was to supervise the works of the *mundas* of several villages. Both the *munda* and the *manki* got some commission on the revenue collected.[24] He had some police duties too and he settled an abandoned holding or uncultivated land.

The Mundas of Chota-Nagpur proper (modern Ranchi district) were probably the original clearers of the land. Originally they had no central authority like a raja, and their settlements were divided into *parha* of 15 to 20 or even 25 villages, each under its *manki* and local *mundas.*[25] The local chiefs probably received no rent, but only assistance in war and a *salami* at festivals. The Munda was the head of the village, but the final authority vested with the *manki* or the *mankis* in council united with the *mundas*. This, according to Baden Powell, "resembled the Dravidian form of South India where the village or other family groups were aggregated into unions called 'nad' or 'nadu', with some kind of chief, acting as regards the 'nad', or in council with other chiefs in affairs effecting the whole country".[26]

The Oraons of this area perhaps occupied lands already cleared by the Mundas. The main source of revenue of their chiefs was the special landholding in each village. The villages were divided into lots or '*khunts*', one of these being the '*majhas*' land or royal farm, another going to the headman, and yet another to the '*pahan*' or priest for the worship of the great goddess, the district god, and the village deity.[27] Eventually the chief, called raja, not satisfied with the *majhas* began to take a grain share also from all lands except the priest's and the headman's. The *mahto* served as an accountant, getting his allotment of land. Such lands and those held by *bhuinhars* or original clearers, were exempt from tax. To provide for the cultivation of the royal farm or '*majhas*' land, the king made an allotment (*betkheta*) to certain cultivators, which was exempt

23. J. C. Jha, British Occupation of Kolhan. 1836-37. Indian History Congress Proceedings, 1965.
24. Radha Kamal Mukerjee, *op. cit.* p. 32.
25. Davidson to Ouseley, 29 Aug. 1839, para 2, no 247, Misc. Dispatch Book. G. G.s, Agent's office, Patna Archives.
26. Baden-Powell, *op. cit.* 117. Also see R. K. Mukerjee, *op.cit.* 33.
27. *Ibid.*, 119.

from revenue on condition that they should work the '*majhas*' lands. Thus all lands except the lands of the *bhuinhars* and the *betkheta* paid a share to the king of chief, and was called 'Rajhas' land.

In the early years of the Munda settlement, there seems to have been no individual ownership of land. The tribesmen cleared their village lands under the leadership of their headman or *munda* and village priest or *pahan*, who were responsible for re-allocating lands and collecting such dues or services as were owed to the community. No regular system of revenue seems to have existed. But the *munda* and the *manki* held lands in their respective jurisdictions and perhaps gifts of grain were received.[28] The unoccupied land belonged to the *parha*, and gradually all the waste lands were occupied

The cheros and kharwars of Palamau had a number of *jagirdars* during this period. Raja Gopal Rai, the chief of Palamau, had agreed to pay Rs. 12,000 revenue a year to the East India Company in 1771.[29] He, however, became a tool in the hands of Udwant Ram Quanungo. The destruction of the raja's estate thus begun was completed by the Decennial Settlement. Certain old *jagirdars* were allowed to pay their revenue through the raja, but many new men were confirmed as *jagirdars*, although they had acquired them in a doubtful way. The result was a fall in the income of the raja and in his prestige *vis-a-vis* his *jagirdars*. Subsequently the raja's estate was sold up for arrears of revenue, and the *jagirdars* remained a constant source of trouble.

In such *parganas* of Chota-Nagpur proper, as Tamar, Rahi and Baranda, which had a difficult approach and were strongly fortified by nature, something of this village organisation survived even into the nineteenth century. S. T. Cuthbert, the Ramgarh magistrate, described the way the headmen and village priests transacted the village business, calling the villagers together in May and distributing to those wishing to cultivate their different portions of land.[30] No *Patta* or written document was given ; the extent of the cultivator's *jote* or field was shown before witnesses, and a piece of earth as a token of acceptance was taken from the headman or *mahto* as he was called in some areas.

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28. *Ibid.*, 117.
29. J. C. Jha, *The Kol Insurrection in Chota-Nagpur*, 1964.
30. S. T. Cuthbert to Govt., 21 April 1827, para 36, Beng. Cr. Judl. Cons. 53 of 14 June 1827 (158/22).

Above the village was a wider tribal division, the *parha* or *patti* under a circle headman called the *manki*. The *mankis* exercised an influence over the tribal masses and at festival times, when the members of the *parha* assembled "to hunt, amuse themselves and decide disputes", the *mankis* exercised considerable authority.[31] Each *parha* had its distinguishing flag[66], the attempt to make use of which by the Coles of another *purh a* at their festivals immediately leads to serious quarrels."[32] John Davidson, the Assistant political agent at Lohardagga, saw this system in parts of *parganas* Khukhra and Sonepur in 1839.

Tribal society was already feeling the unhappy effects of the hinduisation of the tribal chiefs of the area when the British brought in their complex, legalistic revenue system to it. Both impacts introduced foreign nations and foreign people into the area, leading to the ruin of the tribal peasantry. Neither these hinduised chiefs nor the English administrators, born and bred in the tradition of agricultural landlordism, had any sympathy with the tradition of tribal ownership of land. The non-tribal settlers and subordinate officers took advantage of the British laws and exploited the peasants.

Thus in the first half of the nineteenth century the traditionl tribal society was being undermined : customs were being undermined by contract, a barter economy by a money economy they had not yet learnt to handle, and divisions of the land determined by tribal custom were replaced by a landlord-tenant relationship.

The new non-tribal *diwans*, *tahsildars*, priests and others got extensive grants of land. Some of the newcomers, Baraiks, Rajputs and Rauteas, even held *jagir* at fixed rents which were granted for the performance, as Davidson reported, of military services—services used to cow the tribal subjects.[33] The brahmans secured equally extensive grants of land, especially in the Khukhra and Doesa *parganas*. Davidson, in 1839, described the brahmans and individuals of other castes who had come from "below the ghauts and grants of land generally by the purchase at fixed rents from the different rajas, sometimes also rent-free, and also grants of rent-free lands for religious purposes, in the mode

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31. Davidson to Ouseley, 29 Aug. 1839, para 3, no. 247, Misc. Dispatch Book, G. G's Agent's Office, Patna Archives.
32. *Ibid.*, para 3.
33. *Ibid.*, para 6.

usually given by Hindoos."[34] Needless to say, all these outsiders—including Muslim merchants and servants of the maharaja and dependent rajas—were provided with land at the expense of the tribal cultivators.

Here and there, it is true, local conditions enabled the *mankis* and *mundas* to survive, and to protect tribal landholdings—as in remote Tamar and Sonepur where the original heads of villages were strong enough to inspire fear. Elsewhere, however, the headmen "were entirely dispossessed and replaced by Suds [foreigners] or their villagers [were] resumed by the raja himself."[35]

The East India Company raised the amount of tribute payable by the mahāraja of Chota-Nagpur in stages : the tribute fixed for him in 1771 was Rs. 4,000 ; in 1774 it was raised to Rs. 15,001 ; and under the Permanent Settlement (Regulation I of 1793) it become Rs. 15,043-9.[36] This naturally led to rack-renting : the tribal peasantry was taxed more and more. The maharaja had undertaken not to exact from the raiyats any casses, except the customary ones, and not to take *mangan* and exact *begar*. Nonetheless he imposed heavy burdens of his own upon the people : even though he received about Rs. 338,077 from his *jagirdars* and further amounts from Tori *pargana* and from a number of *bhandar* villages (lands of which were under his direct possession and cultivation), he also imposed a number of *abwabs* or cesses.[37] Whenever he bestowed a *jagir* or confirmed a *sanad* to the heirs of a deceased *jagirdar* he expected a *nazarana* of from 1,000 to 1,500 rupees. Several gifts and contributions (*madad*, *māngan*, etc.) were exacted.

The chiefs, *jagirdars* and other superior tenure-holders had no right under tribal custom to increase the rent of the village lands, nor could they drive out the old cultivators. But these age-old customs were now frequently violated by the non-tribal farmers in the early years of the nineteenth century. Again, where the rent had been paid in service—three days' plouhging, three days' work with the spade, three days of rice-planting and three days of harvest work and so on—the new owners came

34. *Ibid.*, para 10.
35. *Ibid.*, para 8;
36. Reid, *Ranchi Settlement Report*, para 34.
37. Cuthbert to Govt., 21 April 1827, para 11, Beng. Cr. Judl. Cons. 53 of 14 June 1827 (132/22). About Rs. 80,000 came from the *bhandar* villages annually.

to demand far more work than custom had permitted.[38] *Thikadars* or revenue farmers came to cultivate considerable areas by forced labour exacted without limit from the tribal ryots.

The *bhuinhars* (the original clearers of the land, e.g., the *munda* and the *manki*) had a hereditary interest in the land, and even when they fled the village, they had a right to reclaim the land on their return. But now the non-tribal farmers not only refused to recognise the right of their heirs, but also took possession of the land on their leaving the village. Not only that, but by harassing them in the courts or in the police *thanas*, they forced the *bhuinhars* to leave the village.[39]

Thus the first half of the nineteenth century saw great changes in the land-revenue system of this tribal area. Unfortuantely when the local chiefs were unsympathetic towards the peasant's cause no sympathetic British revenue officer was deputed to this area before Wilkinson became the Political Agent. Naturally enough, severe exactions by the non-tribal farmers of revenue, and the grant of large number of tribal landholdings to oppressive foreigners led to recurrent unrest from 1792 to 1832.

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38. Davidson to Ouseley, 29 August 1839, para 14, no. 247, Misc. Dispatch Book, G. G's Agent's Office, Patna Archives.
39. *Ibid.*, para. 19.